AUTOMOTIVE

How To Jack Up A Car

Published: November 20, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Introduction: Why Knowing How to Jack Up a Car Is Essential

Every driver will eventually face a flat tire, need to inspect the undercarriage, or perform routine brake work. Understanding how to jack up a car safely and correctly is one of the most fundamental skills in basic vehicle maintenance. Whether you are stranded on a roadside or working in your garage, knowing the proper technique can prevent serious injury and costly damage to your vehicle. This comprehensive guide will walk you through every step, from selecting the right equipment to raising the vehicle securely. We will cover different types of jacks, locating proper lift points, using jack stands, and common mistakes to avoid. By the end, you will have the confidence to lift any car or SUV safely.

Essential Safety Precautions Before You Start

Lifting a vehicle is inherently dangerous. A car that falls off a jack can crush bones or cause fatal injuries. Therefore, safety must be your top priority.

- Always use jack stands: Never work under a vehicle supported only by a jack. Jacks are for lifting, not holding. Jack stands provide stable, reliable support.
- Choose a level, solid surface: Avoid soft ground, gravel, or slopes. Concrete or asphalt is ideal. If you must work on an uneven surface, use wheel chocks and ensure the jack base is stable.
- Engage the parking brake: Always set the parking brake firmly. For automatic transmissions, put it in Park. For manuals, leave it in first gear or reverse.
- Chock the wheels: Place wheel chocks (or large blocks) on both sides of the wheels that remain on the ground. For example, if lifting the front, chock the rear wheels.
- Remove heavy loads: Take out excess weight from the trunk or cabin to reduce strain on the jack and stands.
- Inspect your equipment: Check the jack, jack stands, and any extension or adapters for cracks, rust, or damage. Never use faulty equipment.
- Wear appropriate clothing: Avoid loose garments that can snag. Wear closed-toe shoes and gloves if needed.

Tools and Equipment You Will Need

Before lifting, gather all necessary tools. The right equipment makes the job easier and safer.

- Car jack: Common types include scissor jacks (often in spare tire kits), floor jacks (hydraulic trolley jacks), bottle jacks, and hi-lift jacks (for off-road vehicles). For most home mechanics, a floor jack with a capacity of at least 1.5 to 2 times your vehicle’s weight is recommended.
- Jack stands: At least two, rated for your vehicle’s weight. Ideally, use stands with a locking mechanism and a wide base.
- Wheel chocks: Rubber or wooden wedges to block wheels.
- Lug wrench or impact wrench: For removing wheel nuts if you are changing a tire.
- Owner’s manual: Always refer to it for specific jacking points and recommended jack capacity.
- Gloves and safety glasses: Protect your hands and eyes from dirt, debris, and potential slips.
- Optional: A rubber pad or block of wood to protect the vehicle’s pinch welds when using a floor jack.

Step-by-Step Guide: How to Jack Up a Car

Follow these steps carefully. The process may vary slightly depending on your jack type and vehicle, but the core principles remain the same.

Step 1: Position the Vehicle and Prepare the Area

Park the car on a flat, hard surface. Turn off the engine and remove the key. Engage the parking brake. Place wheel chocks behind the wheels that will remain on the ground. For example, if you are lifting the front of the car, chock both rear wheels. If lifting the rear, chock the front wheels. This prevents the vehicle from rolling.

Step 2: Locate the Proper Jacking Points

This is the most critical step. Using the wrong point can bend the frame, punch a hole in the floor pan, or cause the car to slip. Consult your owner's manual. Most modern cars have reinforced pinch welds behind the front wheels and in front of the rear wheels. These are small, flat metal flanges often indicated by notches or arrows on the rocker panel. Some vehicles have dedicated jacking points under the front crossmember or rear differential (for solid axle vehicles). Never jack on plastic body parts, control arms, or the oil pan.

Step 3: Position the Jack Correctly

Place the jack directly under the designated lifting point. For a floor jack, ensure the saddle (the lifting pad) is centered. If using a scissor jack, make sure its groove fits snugly over the pinch weld. For a bottle jack, use a flat base and a lifting pad that matches the vehicle's contact point. Some jacks require a piece of hardwood to distribute the load if the surface is uneven or the contact area is small.

Step 4: Raise the Vehicle Slowly

Pump the jack handle or turn the scissor jack screw steadily and smoothly. Watch the vehicle as it lifts. Ensure it remains stable on the jack base and that the ground doesn't shift. Lift the vehicle until the tire you intend to remove is off the ground by about one to two inches, or until you have enough clearance for your work (e.g., brake job). Do not lift higher than necessary, as this increases instability.

Step 5: Place Jack Stands Immediately

Once the vehicle is at the desired height, do NOT crawl under it yet. Place a jack stand (or two, if supporting an axle) under a reinforced area of the vehicle such as the frame rail, subframe, or designated jack stand point. Adjust the stand so that when lowered, the vehicle's weight rests on the stand's saddle, not the jack. Lower the jack slowly until the vehicle contacts the stand completely. Then continue lowering the jack until the vehicle is fully supported by the stands. The jack should be removed or left in place but not bearing weight. Always use jack stands rated for the load. For extra safety, use two stands on each side if working under the entire front or rear.

Step 6: Test Stability

Before working under the vehicle, give it a firm push from the side. If the vehicle moves or wobbles, lower it and re-check the stands and surface. If it is solid, you are safe to proceed. For a wheel change, now is the time to remove the lug nuts and swap the tire.

Step 7: Lowering the Vehicle

When the job is done, raise the vehicle slightly with the jack (if it is still in place) or reposition the jack under the jacking point if you removed it. Remove the jack stands carefully. Then slowly lower the jack until the vehicle rests fully on the ground. For hydraulic jacks, open the release valve gently. For scissor jacks, turn the handle counterclockwise. Remove the jack and store all equipment.

Using Different Types of Jacks: Tips and Tricks

Not all jacks work the same way. Understanding your specific equipment ensures safety.

Scissor Jack

Most common in emergency kits. These are lightweight but have limited capacity and stability. They should only be used for emergency tire changes, not for working underneath the vehicle. Always ensure the base is on solid, level ground. Scissor jacks can tip over easily on uneven surfaces.

Floor Jack (Hydraulic Trolley Jack)

Preferred by mechanics. Floor jacks have a low profile, roll easily, and lift quickly. They are ideal for garage use. Always check the oil level and ensure the release valve works smoothly. Place a rubber pad on the saddle to protect the pinch weld.

Bottle Jack

Often used for trucks and SUVs. They have a small base and a tall lifting range. Use on solid ground; a block of wood can help stabilize the base. Bottle jacks are hydraulic and may need periodic bleeding. Never use a bottle jack on its side, as they are designed to operate vertically.

Hi-Lift Jack

Used primarily for off-road vehicles. These are dangerous if not used correctly. The handle can kick back violently. Always follow manufacturer instructions carefully. Never use a hi-lift jack on a passenger car with low ground clearance.

Common Mistakes to Avoid When Jacking Up a Car

- Ignoring jack points: Lifting on suspension components, the oil pan, or the radiator support can cause expensive damage.
- Overloading the jack: Using a jack rated for less than half the vehicle's weight is asking for failure. Always check the capacity.
- Relying solely on a jack: Even the best hydraulic jack can fail. Always use jack stands for support.
- Working on a slope: The car will roll or the jack will slide. Chocks may not hold on a steep incline.
- Rushing the lift: Pumping too fast can cause the jack to skip or the vehicle to sway. Steady and slow wins.
- Forgetting to chock wheels: A car can roll off the jack if the transmission is in Park but the parking brake fails.
- Placing jack stands on an unstable surface: Dirt, gravel, or asphalt softened by heat can shift under the stand's base.

When to Call a Professional vs. DIY

While changing a tire or performing simple inspections is well within reach of most homeowners, there are times when you should leave the lifting to a professional. If the vehicle is heavily damaged, if you suspect structural rust, or if you lack confidence in your equipment, take it to a shop. Additionally, if you need to jack up a vehicle with air suspension or a very low ground clearance, specialized adapters may be required. Always assess your skill level honestly.

Conclusion

Knowing how to jack up a car safely is a vital skill that can save you time, money, and risk. By following the correct procedures—selecting the right jack, locating manufacturer-recommended lift points, and always using jack stands—you can perform most basic maintenance tasks with confidence. Remember that no job is urgent enough to skip

safety. Take your time, inspect your gear, and never compromise on support. Whether you are a seasoned mechanic or a first-time driver, the principles in this guide will keep you safe and your vehicle secure. Practice these steps in a controlled environment before you find yourself stranded on a busy road. Stay safe, and happy wrenching.

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